

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY  
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Idora Park Project

Personal Experience

O.H. 932

THEODORE T. TERLESKY

Interviewed

by

Robert J. Toti

on

December 4, 1986

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

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INTERVIEWEE: THEODORE T. TERLESKY

INTERVIEWER: Robert J. Toti

SUBJECT: Idora Park

DATE: December 4, 1986

RT: This is an interview with Teddy Terlesky for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on the Idora Park Project, by Rob Toti, at Wilson High School, on December 4, 1986, at 2:00 p.m.

First of all, could tell me something about your childhood?

TT: My childhood?

RT: Yes.

TT: Okay, I was born and raised in Youngstown, Ohio on March 30, 1944, a product of the Youngstown City School System, that being Parmelee Elementary School, which is no longer in existence. It was at the corner of Belmont and Parmelee, I believe. From there, to the Jefferson Elementary School System through sixth grade. Jefferson to Hayes for junior high, and then Rayen High School. I completed Rayen in 1962. I graduated Rayen High School. From there to Youngstown State University, from 1962 to when I graduated in 1966 with a Bachelor of Arts Degree, social studies comprehensive major. What else do you want?

RT: That is basically about it. When did you first get involved with law enforcement?

TT: Prior to graduation in my senior year, I came on to the Youngstown Police Department, which was August 1, 1966. Actually, I didn't graduate until 1967. I have been with the Youngstown Police Department now for twenty years.

RT: What was your first experience with Idora Park?

TT: In 1967 I was asked whether or not I would like to work for Idora Park as a security guard, at which time I did. I took up the opportunity and spent approximately, 17 to 18 years with them.

RT: Why did you decide to become an Idora Park employee?

TT: Supplemental income, basically. Supplement the income of the city worker.

RT: Where did you work?

TT: As far as the park?

RT: Yes.

TT: Well, the park, if you know, is approximately 28 acres, and we were responsible for perimeter coverage along with security on the midway itself, which also took into consideration the rides. The layout of the park was always divided into the upper half and the lower half. The lower half going from the ballroom to the Penny Arcade, and the upper half being the Penny Arcade and taking everything into consideration, all the way up to Parkview Avenue. That is the way that you [divide it] for security purposes. So, you worked through the top half or the lower half.

RT: So, there was always a co-worker then?

TT: Oh, yes. The biggest crowd I had seen out there in my 18 years was approximately 15,000 people at one particular time. Anything over 10,000 people in that park is considered crowded. Fifteen thousand is a monstrous type situation. Like I said, I saw 15,000 and that was for Teamsters Local 377 when they held their annual picnics up there. Many commercial business places throughout Northeastern Ohio, Southwestern Ohio, anywhere within a range of 100 to 150 miles used to utilize Idora Park for commercial picnics in the summertime.

RT: Could you describe a typical day for yourself?

TT: At Idora Park?

RT: While you were at the park.

TT: Okay, well, it depended on how you worked. If you worked 3:00 to 11:00, of course, you couldn't work for the park, which as a young patrolman you either worked 3:00 to 11:00 or 11:00 to 7:00. So, two weeks of the month I was only permitted to work there two days a week, which were my off days. You would work either a full day, which could possibly go from 10:00 to 10:00, or a half day depending on how management had it broken down, which would be 5:00 to 10:00. So, like I say, you were limited to two days a week in that respect, when you worked 3:00 to 11:00. When you worked 11:00 to 7:00, many times you were able to put in--when I first started, we went seven days a week. Then it went down to six days a week, and then it got to a situation and went down to five days a week. I saw it go down to four days a week in my tenure there. When I was on 11:00 to 7:00 there were many days I went there at 12:00 noon, didn't start earlier because of the fact that I needed some sleep, and went there 12:00 noon and worked straight through 12:00 to 10:00 five days a week. Then I went down to the city at 11:00. I worked the 11:00 to 7:00 turn.

RT: So, could you explain basically what you did while you were on duty at the park?

TT: As security employees for the Idora Park Amusement Company, what we did was handle anything that happened within the perimeter of the park. That took into consideration juvenile problems as well as adult problems.

Juvenile problems, in my tenure there, ranged from anything noncriminal, which could be a lost child to an injury, to criminal, which involved armed robbery. I probably had seen an armed robbery committed with a weapon and without a weapon. I can remember, just to guess off the top of my head I can think of, probably, about 20. That happened when I was there on particular days. Arson, we got involved with arson. A lot of destruction of property. Our biggest problems out there were probably destruction of property and assaults. Assaults being because of the fact that you have large crowds, some racially motivated throughout the years, others just assaults before the act of robbery was committed. Robbery being, say a young group of toughs or a tough picking on a weaker individual and attempting to relieve him of his monies so that he can enjoy his day at the park.

Adults, with reference to adult crime, we had robbery in reference to adults. We are talking basically more theft than anything else. Stuff from the games they were trying to steal. . . you would be surprised how the public wants stuffed animals. We used to get

adults actually stealing stuffed animals. We used to get adults who, for one reason or another, didn't either have the money or for a variety of reasons would steal food. We used to have numerous thefts of food. People would come there at the time of the day and enjoy their picnic up on the hill, and they would come back and their food would be gone and taken. We sold alcoholic beverages in the park, therefore, it brought on the common drunk, an inebriated or intoxicated individual and that precipitated, of course, a lot of complaints. We made numerous, numerous drunk arrests. In conjunction with the numerous drunk arrests we made, twice as many people were asked to leave the park and/or taken by responsible adults, responsible co-workers, or responsible family members to their car or home, in short of being arrested. We always gave you an alternative. You know, everybody likes to go to a park and enjoy themselves. We always gave you an alternative to remove this person from the park premises or face arrest. Nine times out of 10 we wouldn't, but a lot of times, for one reason or another, you couldn't find somebody who wanted to take responsibility or there wasn't anybody to take responsibility for that individual. Of course, intoxication arrests came about. With intoxication arrests came resisting arrest charges, came assault charges against police officers through the years.

We had a major riot there in 1968, the Spencer brothers I believe. That was right after--who was assassinated in 1968? Martin Luther King, right? After Martin Luther King was assassinated. . . .

RT: Bobby Kennedy.

TT: Kennedy too, but more or less, it was after Martin Luther King was assassinated, April 4 or April 5, somewhere there. That summer was a hot summer at the park. Of course, our walk in traffic was, basically, more white than black. As a matter of fact, we were going to go to a cover charge eventually to keep the individuals from walking in the park that had no money, that just came through. At one point in time it was a public park. When I started there in 1966 and from the beginning there was no admission. Approximately--don't quote me--but, 1972 or 1973 they went to an admission type situation, as all of your parks did. Prior to that, in 1968 and earlier back, we had a major riot there. I happened to be working that day. I believe it was the Spencer brothers, who were two Black individuals. No quote on Spencer's because I am not really sure, but that name rings a bell. We had an all out affair, which was a riotous type situation where we had to bring in every police officer in the city of Youngstown to control the situation. We closed the

park. We were fortunate that we lost no lives, [but] we did have police injuries. We had civilian injuries, we had police injuries. At least four individuals were arrested, charged with rioting, and convicted of rioting. We had a lot of property damage that night. We had a lot of theft, a lot of property damage, a lot of assaults by Black youths rampaging through the crowds and assaulting Whites. It was a bad situation.

At any one point in time, police wise, you could find . . . I have used as many as twenty-five officers at one time out there and that was for the so-called men of the rock. We used to bring in rock concerts and rock-n-roll bands. Bobby Sherman played there, that was one of the bigger ones. Bobby Sherman was popular back then, the late 1960s or early 1970s. We had numerous concerts there. The Cove South, which was designated Cove South, was the original Heidelberg restaurant where we used to hold the record hops. We really had a problem with that place. It was a money making situation which is the reason the park didn't want to let it go. The police who worked there made their money. It was a Friday night affair and it was a Friday night affair for assistance for police coming up there and breaking up fights. We had a couple of knifings up there, assaults again, a lot of resisting arrest. We had a lot of problems, but with reference to all of the problems that we encountered, for the amount of enjoyment the general public got from Idora Park overwhelmed the amount of problems that anyone experienced, including myself, for the last 18 years. I mean, the percentile is very minimal. What else do you need?

RT: What were the park's policies concerning some of these problems? You mentioned quite a bit.

TT: Park policy was really left up to your general manager who we had a direct relationship with and we actually worked for. He had more say so than anybody out there. He didn't really put down park policy with reference to the police because of the fact that he didn't have security officers per se; he had sworn police officers. We knew our job and we knew what our responsibilities were. So, he did not designate park policy to us. From 1974, I think I took over as chief security officer for him. For six or seven years whatever I wanted to do, basically I could do. If I had to make an arrest, I made the arrest. He backed us up 100 percent. If I felt that I didn't want to make the arrest for the good of the park possibly, for whatever reason I didn't want to make an arrest, I felt that it was a better situation, that I [should] use some other type of action, and I took it. Like I said, minus anything that was criminal, because whenever you have criminal

activity, of course, you have a perpetrator and you have a victim. Of course, the victim makes the decision in those cases. If it is a juvenile, the parent makes the decision. If it is an adult, the adult makes the decision. So we really don't have too much play there, we don't have too much latitude. We have to go with whatever the victim says. But if it was a crime against the park, as opposed to crime against a person visiting the park, like I said, I make the determination or Duffy or the other two make the determination for the good of the park and/or management and general public. So, like I said, we had a lot of latitude, a lot of leeway with what we did in reference to the park and their problems out there.

RT: Were there any employee problems that you had to deal with?

TT: Sure, we had numerous theft problems with reference to employees. We caught them and nine times out of 10 they were. . . . I really can't think of anybody that we prosecuted. We tried various ways to make an attempt to alleviate the problem but people being human and temptation there. Basically we were dealing with young kids, as far as employees, you know, 15, 16, and 17. The temptation was there to take a quarter. Take a quarter here and take a quarter there and those quarters added up. Over years we found individuals making \$100 a week, which wasn't hard to do. Stealing \$100 a week, four quarters an hour, eight hours a day, you know, the money adds up. If it was ever found out to be true, we just dismissed it as opposed to prosecuting as far as staff goes.

RT: How about giving free rides or free food?

TT: Free rides and free food, the same thing. They were usually verbally warned the first time and if they were caught again then they were, nine times out of ten, dismissed. I am sure there were numerous occasions when free food was given out. The inventory problem out there was enormous.

The game situation, like every time somebody played a game--we installed lights above the booths. So anytime you handed that individual a quarter to play a game or 50 cents, whatever it was, you had to pull a string which lit up a light above him, which we from the office could observe, especially down the sides of the midway. It was probably more psychological than anything else because he knew when he received the quarter that he had to pull the light, the light went off. Like I said, it was more psychological in trying to deter theft more than anything else. We know they got away with it. Every year we had to write off our

losses. There was just no concrete way to guarantee that it didn't happen.

Theft with reference to rides was the same way. Relatively speaking, when you gave a ride away, you were committing a theft against the park because the ride cost X amount of money. There is no doubt in my mind that there were a lot of rides given away.

RT: You mentioned some of the major problems that took place, but could you tell me about some of the less significant ones like people trying to sneak into the park, breaking the dress code and things of that nature?

TT: As far as the dress code was concerned, we had no problem there. When it was open to the public, if we felt that they weren't up to our policy, we just asked them to leave. Upon failure of asking them to leave, then we commanded that they leave. Upon failure to do that, then they could be arrested because it was private property.

Getting into the park was always a problem. The perimeter being as large as it was, there was no way you could watch the fence consistently. We greased the fence down. We never electrified it or anything to that extreme but we used to grease it down. We had observational points set up on big days. I would hire like Wells Fargo, where at a minimal cost they would watch our fence. At one point in time we had dogs watching the fence with a controlled handler. Once again, strictly psychological. That handler would never turn that dog loose on an individual.

When we went to the stamp system we found individuals trying to duplicate our stamps, the color of ink. We went to the combination of the stamp and the hand string. Well, you were up there as a little kid, weren't you?

RT: Yes.

TT: Okay, with the little clip that you couldn't take off. You could break the string and tie it underneath. We used to find numerous occasions of that. Depending if it was a family situation where many times a young fellow would get the string caught on a ride and he would break it off. We always said to come to the office and we will put a new one on you. A lot of people, when they left the park, ripped the string off. Kids would find them in the parking lot and tie them on and come over the fence. We usually had somebody in back of the storeroom just cut their string off and remove their stamp with some alcohol and send them out



the gate. We never received any retaliation from putting anybody out the gate because they knew they were in there illegally anyhow.

RT: Where were you usually stationed while you were on duty?

TT: Myself, like I said, when I first went out there in 1966 it was either the upper end or the lower end. On quiet days you had, maybe, two upper and two lower. On a busy day like a massive picnic, we had 10 up and 10 down. You just wandered from stand to stand and from ride to ride, congregating at every one you went [to]. When I took over the security out there I positioned myself basically at the office to handle all incoming calls and whatever security problems. We had our walkie-talkie type system set up where you could get a hold of the base. I was basically at the office the last five or six years directing the operation.

RT: What was your relationship with John Zebco, like when you were his supervisor?

TT: When I was his supervisor? I was never John's supervisor. John worked the park for many years and we worked together. When I took over supervision of the park, I took over. . . . There is a distinction between the ballroom and the midway. I was the supervisor of the midway. Ed Molchan, who was the supervisor of the ballroom, was directly responsible for John Zebco. When John left the midway, he took care of the security in the ballroom for all the dances and all of the functions in the ballroom. So therefore, I wasn't his supervisor. Ed Molchan was his supervisor, he reported to him. Like I said, I was never John Zebco's immediate supervisor on the midway. If I had a problem or something I could call upon John. He basically stayed in the ballroom and handled everything in there with Ed Molchan, and I handled the midway.

RT: What do you remember about the park owners?

TT: When I first got there, before they bought the Rindin family out, there was Pat Duffy, general manager and president, there was Max Rindin--that is the one that is in Florida--there was Tony Cavalier, and there was Lenny Cavalier. Those were the four officers. Lenny being Tony's son. Mickey Rindin who runs the ballroom . . . I don't know if he was an officer of the corporation or not, but he was Max's son. Then there was Pat Duffy, of course, who was the general manager and principal owner. It was his dad that started Idora Park back in the late 1800s. He had two boys, young Pat Jr. and Mike Duffy, who worked throughout their years in the park. What was the question?

RT: Just what did you remember about them and how often were these men at the park?

TT: They were at the park constantly. They lived at the park. They lived at the park on a six, seven day a week basis from April through Labor Day. Then, of course, during the off months and the winter months, they came at will and at leisure. They lived out there seven days a week. Many times not going home but for a couple of hours a day. Their wives were used to it. You know, that was their way of life.

RT: What kind of a relationship did you have with these men?

TT: Good. I had no problems with any of them. None at all. All fine individuals. We differed on various things that happened in the park. I didn't have that much of a voice but when I did voice my opinion, they would listen. They would make their own decision, of course. There were never any personality conflict problems with myself with relation to that.

RT: Could you tell me a little bit about night security?

TT: We had a night man on. Well, we had one 24 hours a day at various times. It amounted to a civilian or a security person who would come out and work basically from 11:00 to 7:00. Although we closed up at 10:00, we were there until 1:00 or 2:00 in the morning counting money. Then you had to make your bank drop. In the meantime, your security guard would come on at 11:00 and made his rounds from 11:00 to, I think it was 11:00 to 8:00 or 12:00 to 8:00. Those guys were back there at 8:00 in the morning. So there was only one man seven days a week to work basically 11:00 or 12:00 to 8:00. If he ran into any problems, he just called the Youngstown Police Department for assistance.

RT: Getting back to your job as head of security, were there ever any instances when people were injured on the park rides?

TT: Yes. Not numerous, but we had our share of injuries. The majority of which were minor. When I say minor, a cut finger, a bruise, a scrape, or a sore shoulder. I believe there was someone killed there. I know there was someone killed there in the past. The most serious injury in my tenure there, I don't remember what year, was the young girl that her hair got caught in the ferris wheel as it was going around. That was the most serious incident that I can think of at this time.

RT: How were they attended to?

TT: We always had a nurse on duty. Of course, the ambulance service was available to us. If it was something more serious than the nurse could handle, then we called for the ambulance crew to come up and we backed them right into our so-called hospital up there and put them into the hospital. First aid treatment was the only thing given out there.

RT: Were there ever any lawsuits?

TT: Yes, there were lawsuits. That would be strictly under management. I know the insurance company settled at various times for various lawsuits but as to what amount, you know, I didn't go into that.

RT: You didn't ever have to appear in court over a problem?

TT: No, never had to go to court on anything. Like I said, the majority, if not all, were always handled outside of court with the insurance company.

RT: What was your busiest time of the year at the park?

TT: Your commercial picnics, depending on which one, or promotions. Picnics or promotions were the busiest times. Almost every Saturday was booked. Saturday was probably the busiest day of the week. Every Saturday was booked. Some bigger picnics took like Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, and Saturday. Either Saturday or Sunday was the biggest day of the week and they were taken up by commercial picnics.

RT: How did you feel about Spring Thing?

TT: Oh, I enjoyed it. We had no problems. As I said, for the amount of kids that went out there to enjoy themselves, we didn't have any major problems. We had juveniles that were caught drinking and we had juveniles with marijuana and he handled each individual case on some merits. But overall for the amount of kids that came out there to enjoy themselves, like I said, if we had 10 or maybe a dozen incidents during a 12 hour day, I thought that was great.

RT: What was your reaction to the fire that led to the closing of the park?

TT: Reaction to the fire? Unfortunate that it would happen. You know, there was a legacy there that died. I suppose, as far as a motive, being selfish, I faced a monetary loss which affected me. I had to go out and find another job, which I did. I got work with the Youngstown Association in conjunction here with the schools. I was sorry to see it go. But they had their problems through the year. We had gone down to a three

day work week. It was an amusement park that was just slowly but surely dying because of the economic situation here in the valley.

RT: Were you at work when parts of the park went up in flames?

TT: No. As a matter of fact, I was sitting right here. I was sitting right here and I came to work, I punched in at 11:00. I was sitting right here and I looked over and I said to myself, "Damn, there is a hell of a fire somewhere." I figured it was in Mill Creek Park at the distance of the smoke. So I called the station to see where the fire was and some guy on the other end got smart and said, "It is your park burning." I said, "What?" He said, "It is your park burning." I said, "You have got to be kidding me." He said, "No." I took a ride out there and sure enough, she was ablaze.

RT: What did it look like when you went out there?

TT: Oh, have you ever seen pictures of it?

RT: Yes.

TT: It was just a massive fire, uncontrollable. They just had to let it burn itself out. They were fortunate enough that they could stop it at the merry-go-round, which, of course, they sold for \$250,000. They really would have been in a financial bind if they had lost the merry-go-round. He tried to reopen; he did reopen that summer. That section all the way from the merry-go-round down was lost. We put up a couple of offices in the way of rent-a-trailers and we operated like that, but that was the nail in the coffin. There was no doubt about it.

RT: Was there any investigation after the fire took place?

TT: In reference to the fire?

RT: Yes.

TT: I am sure there was, the arson investigators. I acknowledge that they did investigate it. As to what they came up with, it is my belief that they were welding in the Lost River and that supposedly set it off, because you had nothing there but tar and dry wood. That whole place out there was wooden structures. Tar paper on top of tar paper. It was a real inferno when it went up.

RT: Are there any humorous or unusual events that stand out in your mind when you think about the time that you spent working at the park?

TT: Yes, everyday something happened that you laughed at out there. Probably one of the funniest things . . . it was always funny but it turned out to be tragic and costly for the kids that brought their bubbles to the Lost River and loaded up the Lost River with bubbles. You know, they would come down and throw a gallon of liquid soap in there and, of course, you had to close the ride down, but it was funny. Like I said, it really was costly. You had to drain the entire thing and refill it. Numerous things were really funny but I really can't pinpoint anything. I am trying to think, but so many things happened. I just can't pinpoint anything right offhand.

RT: Which events were the most significant?

TT: In which way speaking?

RT: As far as giving a lasting impression on your memory.

TT: Probably the fire. To me it was self reasons. It was a lot of monetary loss to me. That probably was the biggest thing out there.

RT: If you could have done anything to change your job, what would you have done?

TT: Nothing. I would have asked for better equipment, better walkie-talkie communication systems. Like everything else, they try to keep the cost factor down. I would have asked probably for more men and better equipment.

RT: Do you think that there is anything in this interview that hasn't been said that needs to be mentioned?

TT: I am sure there is a lot. You know, we have only been sitting here for half an hour. When you want to think of something, after you leave here I will think of a lot of things. Right now, I can't really think of anything. It is just unfortunate that the city of Youngstown lost a great treasure in Idora Park. I was raised in Briar Hill. My father was a policeman and he spent 20 years out there. He spent more than 20, he probably spent 30 years out there. He was there from 1939. He was there a long time, but he is up in age now. Don't even think of interviewing him. That is basically it. Thank you very much.

TT: You're welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW